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On leading and being led: exploring distributed leadership in a UK University

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Now, more than ever, higher education institutions in the UK and elsewhere are reflecting on the need for flexible leadership models to help adapt and react to the fast changing academic environment (Flumerfelt & Banachowski, 2011). Rapid shifts in the sector are contributing to a kaleidoscopic 'supercomplexity' (Barnett, 2000) of challenges, structures, processes and value frameworks for academics who lead and for those who are led. How are institutions' leadership structures and roles developing in response to these changes? And how do these responses affect academic staff in relation to their identity, status and career trajectory? By drawing on data from a Leadership Foundation funded project exploring the newly formed role of "Academic Lead" (AL) at a research-led institution in the UK, this paper explores how one institution has implemented a new "distributed" leadership model. Crucially, this paper looks at the impact of the model on both those who are leaders and those being led.

Theoretically, the study is framed at two levels. First, at the institutional level, we draw on ideas of distributed leadership (see Gronn, 2009) to explore the model that has been introduced. While the concept of distributed leadership has been widely used in school leadership research (e.g., Mayrowetz, 2008; Spillane *et al.*, 2007; Woods *et al.*, 2004), it has been less widely applied to research exploring the higher education sector (Bryman, 2009). Second, at the level of the individual academic, we draw on a conceptual framework based on the interplay between the three related concepts of socialisation, identity and career trajectory.

The study used a two staged, mixed-methods approach (Bryman, 2008). In stage one, we conducted interviews with 15 Academic Leads (ALs) and 15 Assigned Academics. The sample contained male and female staff with a range of ages and levels of experience. In the second stage of the project we undertook a survey of ALs and assigned academics (n=177) using an online questionnaire.

The findings highlight the complex nature of the power dynamics in this "distributed leadership" model, stemming especially from the tensions between its supportive, 'coaching' ethos on the one hand and the 'performance management' strand of the Academic Lead's role on the other. In addition, for Assigned Academics, there was a significant emphasis on communication-related issues, including the high value placed on opportunities to develop a mutually respectful relationship, and to share in productive dialogue with their Academic Lead throughout the year.